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Abe's Return: Implications for India-Japan Relations

By Arpita Mathur

Synopsis

The return of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to power in Japan amidst a plethora of domestic and regional challenges has raised doubts over whether his outlook towards India will be diluted. Despite these challenges, there is good reason to expect that the Abe government will seek to deepen the India-Japan relationship.

Commentary

JAPAN'S TUMULTUOUS domestic politics has taken yet another sharp turn with the return to power of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) after a hiatus of three years under the leadership of Shinzo Abe. During his brief first tenure as prime minister, Abe was conspicuously vocal about his leaning towards India. His political resurrection is bound to have positive implications for India-Japan relations.

On the face of it, India does not really seem central to Japan's foreign policy concerns, considering that it has more critical issues to manage. Tiding over domestic challenges such as Japan's ongoing economic woes in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster at the Fukushima power plant in March 2011 will certainly be Abe's first priority. The situation in Tokyo's immediate periphery is not very favourable either. Japan faces the task of managing an increasingly petulant China and rising tensions in the East China Sea over Beijing's aggressive territorial claims.

Why India still matters

But New Delhi will attract increasing interest from Abe's government for several reasons.

One, LDP governments have traditionally focused on Japan's alliance with the US. The current Abe administration has likewise made it explicit that repairing and reinvigorating Tokyo's alliance with Washington remains a top priority. Considering that the US perceives its ties with New Delhi to be one of the defining partnerships of the twenty-first century, India will inevitably occupy a prominent place in Tokyo's strategic worldview as well.

Washington has been encouraging India and Japan to come closer as a soft countervailing hedge to Beijing's rise. This became apparent in the 'Common Strategic Objectives' earmarked in the 'Joint Statement of the US-Japan Security Consultative Committee 2011' that both sides 'welcome India as a strong and enduring Asia-Pacific partner... [to] promote trilateral dialogue among the United States, Japan and India.'

Two, in view of the fact both Abe and his current Cabinet are conservative nationalists, relations with China and South Korea are likely to come under strain. The Abe administration has already made clear its intent to revise Japan's pacifist constitution and also indicated its interest in reversing previous Japanese expressions of remorse for wartime atrocities. In putting this intent into action, Tokyo is bound to upset its neighbours. In contrast, relations with India are not tied to the baggage of history and will remain both uncontroversial and warm.

India's economic value to Japan

Three, India can emerge as a significant actor in the economic revitalisation of Japan. The bilateral Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with Japan provides the framework for this. The Abe administration has vowed to boost the economy through such means as augmenting imports from countries like the US, China and India. New Delhi can prove to be a part of the 'China-plus-One' strategy or a source of geographical risk diversification on the economic front. In the past there have been instances of economic ties falling prey to strategic and political disputes with prominent economic partners such as China and South Korea. This problem does not apply to India-Japan economic relations.

Of course, India's potential as an alternative depends on its ability to make itself an attractive investment destination by improving infrastructure and removing administrative bottlenecks. But Japan's investment in India, already significant at US\$2.32 billion in 2011, is poised to grow and Japan itself is helping upgrade infrastructure. In November 2012, Tokyo announced aid amounting to US\$22.6 billion in India's infrastructure sector alone.

Four, the leadership factor itself will weigh heavily in favour of building better and closer India-Japan relations. Abe has indicated a deep interest in furthering bilateral ties. In his book *Towards a Beautiful Country*, he notes that it will not be surprising if, in the next decade, India-Japan relations overtake Tokyo's equations with US and China.

In a recent speech, the Japanese leader stressed values such as protection of the 'freedom of thought, expression, and speech' and reiterated his commitment to build on his goal 'to make Japan's relationship(s) with India...broader and deeper.' With such an upbeat perspective, the current Abe government is sure to take steps closer to India.

Optimism on the Future

There is considerable room for optimism on the future of India-Japan relations under the Abe government, assuming of course that it stays in power for a substantial period of time. The framework for cooperation is already in place in the political, strategic and economic arenas in the form of robust agreements such as CEPA and the Two-Plus-Two Dialogue between India's foreign and defence secretaries and their Japanese counterparts. The dialogue is the only one of its kind for New Delhi, while for Tokyo it is limited to the US and Australia and now India.

The focus now has to be on effective utilisation and implementation of these existing agreements. Abe's leadership is a critical prerequisite for this to happen. Washington's consent and encouragement as a close ally will be an important driver for the relationship at a time when Abe is focused on strengthening ties with the US.

Finally, India will continue to be an asset in Japan's quest for balancing and managing China, especially at a time of brewing Sino-Japanese tensions. In sum, the future of Indo-Japan ties need not take a backseat for Abe in the face of domestic challenges and priorities.

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